

**CHAPTER 7 COMPREHENSIVE PLAN: URBAN DESIGN ELEMENT**

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**700 DECLARATION OF MAJOR POLICIES**

- 700.1 The District must focus its resources on providing particular design improvements to those critical sectors of the District that need special design attention.
- 700.2 The District must afford more attention to the future design and development of its waterfronts. The Potomac and Anacostia Rivers offer tremendous amenities which are unrealized and underutilized.
- 700.3 Downtown and other neighborhoods, particularly those east of the Anacostia River, that are either architecturally significant or poorly designed will need protection and design assistance to ensure that the maintenance or redesign of these neighborhoods responsively addresses the challenge of contributing to the National Capital environment.
- 700.4 Future development must be carefully controlled to protect and enhance the neighborhoods, natural open spaces, and national and international image qualities.

**701 URBAN DESIGN GOAL**

- 701.1 It is the goal of the District to promote the protection, enhancement, and enjoyment of the natural environs and to promote a built environment that serves as a complement to the natural environment, provides visual orientation, enhances the District's aesthetic qualities, emphasizes neighborhood identities, and is functionally efficient.

**702 URBAN DESIGN: GENERAL**

- 702.1 The urban design objectives are to do the following:
- (a) Maintain and enhance the physical integrity and character of the District as the Nation's Capital;
  - (b) Preserve and enhance the outstanding physical qualities of District neighborhoods;
  - (c) Preserve and enhance the outstanding qualities of the natural park and waterfront areas; and
  - (d) Respect the L'Enfant Plan so that it remains a positive guiding force for future development within the District.
- 702.2 The policy established in support of the urban design objectives is to strengthen and enhance the physical image and symbolic qualities of the District that establish its character as an urban center and the Nation's Capital.

**703 NATURAL ENVIRONMENT**

- 703.1 The natural environment objective is to conserve and protect environmentally valuable and sensitive areas that contribute to the design framework of the District.
- 703.2 The policies established in support of the natural environment objective are as follows:
- (a) Protect and enhance the natural setting of the District, ensuring that the resulting natural features and open spaces are available to and can be enjoyed by District residents and visitors; and
  - (b) Encourage appropriate design solutions that contribute to the conservation of the natural resources of the District.

**704 AREAS WITH SEVERE BUILDING CONSTRAINTS**

- 704.1 The objective for areas with severe building constraints is to restrict and sensitively design developments placed on severe slopes and unstable soils.
- 704.2 The policies established in support of the objective for areas with severe building constraints are as follows:
- (a) Undertake protective design measures;

- (b) Minimize grading that removes top soil and vegetation, retain vegetation as much as possible, and establish new vegetation where severe erosion damage has already occurred;
- (c) Integrate open spaces with vegetation into new development and encourage soil stabilization and complementary vegetation, including vines and ground cover plants;
- (d) Use retaining walls, where appropriate, for erosion control, and minimize paved surfaces; and
- (e) Restrict development on unstable soils with slopes over twenty-five percent (25%), such as Rock Creek Valley and related stream valleys.

## **705       STREAMS AND STREAM VALLEYS**

705.1       The streams and stream valleys objectives are to do the following:

- (a) Restrict uses on lands abutting stream valleys, and retain and promote dense vegetation in these areas;
- (b) Restrict land uses generating toxic runoff; and
- (c) Protect stream valley parks by encouraging sensitive urban design solutions on adjacent lands in order to help improve water quality and prevent erosion and siltation of streams.

705.2       The policies established in support of the streams and stream valleys objectives are as follows:

- (a) Ensure that development in these areas is minimal and preserve and respect the natural pattern of the District, where possible. Streams and ravines should not be channeled, but should be retained in their natural condition;
- (b) Preserve land adjacent to streams and ravines as open spaces with dense vegetation cover. These natural flood drainage channels and buffer zones for the watershed should be protected from the adverse effects of urban uses. The affected areas are adjacent to Rock Creek Park and related stream valley parks, Battery Kemble, Glover-Archbold, Watts Branch, and Oxon Run; and
- (c) Develop land adjacent to major and minor stream valleys, with special attention to possible impacts on the watershed.

## **706       WATERFRONT DESIGN AREAS**

706.1 The waterfront design areas objectives are to do the following:

- (a) Preserve waterfront parks and ensure visual and functional integration of urban and recreational development with present uses;
- (b) Enhance the character of natural waterfront parks;
- (c) Create and enhance relationships between the rivers and District residents, develop urban waterfronts and water-related recreation in appropriate locations, and establish attractive pedestrian connections from neighborhoods to activities along the waterfronts; and
- (d) Promote residential and commercial development at appropriate waterfront locations.

706.2 The policies established in support of the waterfront design areas objectives are as follows:

- (a) Promote water-oriented public space uses at the water's edge such as promenades, view points, steps into the water, swimming and boating facilities, public art, or other water-related amenities;
- (b) Require that waterfront design areas complement and enhance urban development;
- (c) Require that waterfront design areas respond to the unique waterfront qualities of the respective site conditions;
- (d) Require that site planning in these areas establish, and be sensitive to, the close interrelationship between buildings, parks and open spaces, and the rivers;
- (e) Orient buildings, open spaces, and prominent views within each of these areas toward the water. These areas generally should not be separated from the shorelines by major roadways;
- (f) Promote portions of these areas as potential future sites for monuments of either national or local significance; and
- (g) Design the Anacostia Park so that it is responsive to its natural character, especially to the upper parks and Kingman Island; (Selected areas should be developed for water-related recreational uses, especially boating and fishing. Water quality should be improved, and swimming, in selected areas with appropriate safety precautions, should be a goal. Pedestrian connections between the parks and Kingman Island should be designed. All recreational facilities should be carefully sited and designed in order to tie them in with the shorelines and open meadows, and to avoid negative impacts on the wildlife refuges. Parking lots should be located on the periphery of the park area to

minimize any adverse impact on the waterfront. Access by mass transit should be encouraged.).

**707 BUILT ENVIRONMENT**

707.1 The built environment objective is to strengthen and enhance the distinguishable physical qualities of the District.

707.2 The policies established in support of the built environment objective are as follows:

- (a) Strengthen and enhance the physical image and symbolic qualities of the District that establish its character as the Nation's Capital;
- (b) Maintain and enhance the horizontal character of buildings within the District and retain and enforce An Act To regulate the height of buildings in the District of Columbia, approved June 1, 1910 (36 Stat. 452, D.C. Code § 5-401 *et seq.*) ("Height Act"), as the guiding design principle for protecting the skyline;
- (c) Retain the current maximum limit in accordance with the Height Act, in order to reinforce the "horizontal" urban quality of the District but, in order to encourage a more detailed articulation of building roof lines and facades, consider adding parapets, cornices, and other architectural embellishments to the list of features allowed to project above the limit established by the Zoning Regulations. (Title 11 DCMR) but within the limit established by the Height Act
- (d) Encourage the emergence of a renewed Downtown with a design quality superior in all respects, as a direct reflection of its design role as part of the monumental core and the retail core;
- (e) Strengthen and enhance the design of the distinguishing physical qualities of neighborhoods; and
- (f) Allow for physical expression of the various cultural values of the neighborhoods.

**708 BUILDINGS**

708.1 The buildings objective is to encourage developments which respond to the horizontal skyline of the District so as to maintain its low-scale image and contribute to the enhancement of the District's character.

708.2 The policies established in support of the buildings are as follows:

- (a) Design residential, commercial, and all other buildings to complement or enhance the physical character of the District; and

- (b) Design buildings to include the use of appropriate arrangements of building materials, height, scale, massing, and buffering to complement the immediate region.

**709       STREETSCAPE**

709.1       The streetscape objective is to establish a clear classification of streets and sidewalks that is functionally efficient and visually coherent, enhances the pedestrian environment, and provides for the orderly movement of goods and services.

709.2       The policies established in support of the streetscape objective are as follows:

- (a) Develop a unifying system of well-designed streets, sidewalks, parks, and pedestrian ways;
- (b) Reduce conflicts between pedestrians and vehicular traffic in order to increase pedestrian safety and comfort;
- (c) Create a visually interesting environment that utilizes the design opportunities present in the public space and defines a special image for both Downtown and District neighborhoods;
- (d) Create an environment in the public space that attracts people and stimulates redevelopment and commerce;
- (e) Encourage the use of the public space for arts and cultural activity;
- (f) Provide opportunities for appropriate location in the public space of aesthetically appealing vending and programmed activities;
- (g) Review the street vending regulations to assure adequate protection of both residential and commercial areas, particularly outside the Central Employment Area, from any adverse impact of street vending;
- (h) Encourage the choice of unenclosed sidewalk cafes over enclosed sidewalk cafes to promote and enhance pedestrian activity while maintaining the essential unobstructed continuity of the sidewalk public space in commercial areas;
- (i) Promote design features such as storefront windows, multiple entrances to retail, and unenclosed sidewalk cafes to encourage pedestrian activity along the streets; and
- (j) Encourage the planting and maintenance of street trees as the single most important streetscape element along commercial and residential streets to provide shade, design continuity, spatial relief, and a juxtaposition of the natural and built environments.

**710 AREAS OF STRONG ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTER**

- 710.1 The areas of strong architectural character objectives are to protect areas of strong architectural character and to provide that the architecture of any new development in these areas be complementary to the existing architectural character.
- 710.2 The policies established in support of the areas of strong architectural character objectives are as follows:
- (a) Respect the boundaries of areas having strong architectural character, both to preserve the continuity of these areas and to prevent inappropriate encroachment;
  - (b) Encourage development adjacent to areas of strong architectural character to provide a physical transition in building design detail in order to create a complementary form of transition;
  - (c) Encourage rehabilitation, rather than demolition or redevelopment, in areas of strong architectural character;
  - (d) Encourage new development within areas of strong architectural character to contribute to the physical identity and character of those areas;
  - (e) Encourage building massing and scale of new development to be sensitive to established patterns;
  - (f) Protect and enhance the green landscape and park-like setting of trees, grass areas, and plants; and
  - (g) Enhance and maintain design emphasis on the special nature of each area through distinctive landscaping and the development of paving, lighting, signs, and street furniture in accord with the architectural character of the area.

**711 AREAS OF STABLE CHARACTER**

- 711.1 The areas of stable character objectives are to maintain those areas of the District that have a positive physical image and to provide that new development and renovation within or adjacent to these areas is complementary in scale and character.
- 711.2 The policies established in support of the areas of stable character objectives are as follows:
- (a) Encourage in-fill development to be complementary to the established character of the area. In-fill development in stable areas should not create sharp changes in physical pattern which might lead to deterioration;

- (b) Encourage rehabilitation, rather than demolition and redevelopment, of architecturally significant and structurally sound structures in deteriorating areas, so that these renovated structures can be initial elements that help to bring about a positive image to an area;
- (c) Use landscaping in areas without strong building character to present a more positive physical image;
- (d) Consider large-scale developments or capital improvement projects as opportunities for establishing a positive image or redirection in deteriorated areas; and
- (e) Use site planning and design treatment to screen unsightly uses, particularly in areas adjacent to manufacturing or industrial yards.

**712 AREAS IN NEED OF NEW AND IMPROVED CHARACTER**

712.1 The areas in need of new and improved character objective is to encourage new development or renovation and rehabilitation of older structures in areas with vacant or underused land or buildings to secure a strong, positive physical identity.

712.2 The policies established in support of the areas in need of new and improved character objective are as follows:

- (a) Encourage well-designed developments in areas that are vacant, underused, or deteriorated. These developments should have strong physical identities;
- (b) Encourage in-fill development of attractive design quality in deteriorated areas to stabilize the physical fabric and to encourage renovation and redevelopment;
- (c) Encourage rehabilitation rather than demolition and redevelopment in appropriate locations in deteriorated areas;
- (d) Use sensitive site planning and design treatment to screen unsightly manufacturing and industrial yards from public view, especially in areas proposed for industry;
- (e) Establish a new physical identity in areas having a strong negative image and where the surrounding areas lack character;
- (f) Use extensive landscaping in areas without character to present a more positive image; and
- (g) Utilize large-scale development or capital improvement projects as opportunities for establishing a positive image or redirection in deteriorated areas.



**713 COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY CORRIDORS**

713.1 The commercial activity corridors objective is to coordinate and strengthen the design function and image of commercial activity corridors that serve neighborhood centers.

713.2 The policies established in support of the commercial activity corridors objective are as follows:

- (a) Ensure that the design of future development respects the urban framework created by the L'Enfant Plan and complements its intent;
- (b) Direct the design and function of high-density commercial, retail, and entertainment development toward Downtown to maintain Downtown as the activity center for the region;
- (c) Encourage the design of functionally active commercial centers within all areas of the District, especially in areas that are not now adequately served;
- (d) Encourage the design of mixed-use development for large-scale projects to create active use during both day and evening hours;
- (e) Orient major new development toward the street in order to emphasize the public space as a setting for active use;
- (f) Balance and design development sensitively within low-scale regional activity centers in order to respect the established residential scale and character of the areas;
- (g) Encourage special design quality around Metrorail stations to create aesthetically pleasing physical concentrations of activity and development;
- (h) Strengthen the function and design image of the development and activity corridors that serve as neighborhood centers;
- (i) Focus special design attention on corridors and centers in areas of the District that have poor images, low development of activity concentrations, and are underserved;
- (j) Encourage the design of future development to be compatible with the established characters of the surrounding areas;
- (k) Encourage the development of physical boundaries between commercial concentrations and adjacent residential areas so as to enhance the character and integrity of both sectors;
- (l) Emphasize the activity function and visual character of corridors and centers through special signs, lighting, design, or other means which contribute to their overall identity

and sense of place, but also allow for the unique identities of the individual businesses;  
and

- (m) Encourage the design of in-fill developments within commercial corridors to be appropriately sited in order to strengthen functional and image guidelines.

## **714 PUBLIC ACTION**

714.1 The public action objective is to implement measures to ensure that master plans, project plans, public facilities, capital improvements, and administrative regulations are consistent with the policies of the Urban Design Element.

714.2 The policies established in support of the public action objective are as follows:

- (a) Establish and publish standards for design review of developments by the Office of Planning in established design areas and of development projects that are subject to the Large Tract Review Procedures of the Office of Planning, effective December 12, 1986 (10 DCMR §2300 *et seq.*), to assure consistency with the urban design and other elements of the Plan:
  - (1) Include, as part of the design review function, a management system that encourages optimum streetscape design, streamlines administrative review and approval, and minimizes maintenance burdens;
  - (2) Develop, as part of the design review system, a thorough program for environmental security as a supportive measure for crime prevention; and
  - (3) Include community participation in the design review process;
- (b) Encourage substantial new or rehabilitated residential, commercial, industrial, or institutional development to provide for the installation and dedication of landscape and streetscape improvements that respond to the design character of that area;
- (c) Investigate various financial and technical assistance mechanisms which would educate, inform, and encourage increased interest by private developers and the general public in the advantages of using good urban design;
- (d) Coordinate efforts with professional design or design-related organizations, historic preservation societies, the general public, and the development community to support policies promoting exemplary design; and
- (e) Endeavor to provide appropriate design guidance and comprehensive controls for signs, particularly for lighted signs, in order to ensure adequate and complementary

retail advertisement and reinforce the positive image qualities of particular commercial areas.

**799        DEFINITIONS**

799.1        The provisions of §199 of chapter 1 of this title and the definitions set forth in that section shall be incorporated by reference in this section.